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Summary/Response to James Woodward's *Making Things Happen*
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James Woodward defends an account of causation he terms a *manipulationist* account of causation. A manipulationist account of causation is, according to Woodward, one in which causal relationships are potentially exploitable for manipulation and control. He draws a number of distinctions between the manipulationist accounts of causation and other theories of causation such as David Lewis's counterfactual theory and Humean regularity theories, for example. He argues that the manipulationist theory has distinct advantages over these competing theories of causation.

Woodward's first distinction are between those theories that take into account what he calls "practical considerations" (i.e. our desire and need to make changes in or manipulate the world around us), and those theories that do account for practical considerations. He argues that any theory that leaves out these sorts of considerations does not have an explanation for why it is we need a theory of causation in the first place. Without taking manipulability into account, philosophers and scientists might just as well be content with mere regularity with no need to posit a unique type of relationship that we call causal. In other words, he argues that our theoretical interests in distinguishing between correlation and causation can best be served by an account of causation that includes

the “practical” and not merely the disinterested or theoretical.

Two examples of what Woodward takes to be disinterested or impractical theories would be Lewis’s counterfactual theory of causation and Wesley Salmon’s conserved quantity theory. He cites common objections that these theories do not correctly track the distinction between causal and noncausal interactions, but his main objection to these theories is rather thus: even when the theories do get causal judgments correct, they only do so because of our practical concerns. The correct causal judgments that are made by these theories are only known to be so because of our ability to set up a hypothetical experiment that would confirm or disprove (depending on whether one adopts a confirmation or a falsification theory of scientific knowledge) the causal judgment. So where these disinterested theories do get it right, they only do so in virtue of our concern for Woodward’s practical considerations.

Woodward considers two theories of causation that he considers to be practical theories. The first is any sort of Humean regularity theory. Whether the regularities are spelled out in terms of universal deterministic regularities or whether the regularities are merely probabilistic, Woodward argues that this theory also does not correctly distinguish between causal and noncausal relationships. While the ability to predict based upon the recognition of regularities will qualify as practical on Woodward’s view, regularities will not be

sufficient to distinguish genuine cases of causation from cases of mere correlation. One might very well be able to make successful predictions based upon regularities between two events with a common cause. But this is no more genuine causation than the relationship between a shadow moving along a wall at various times. The shadow at these different times has a common cause, the object casting the shadow, but there is no causal relationship between the shadow at one time and a shadow at the next. But it is plausible to think, Woodward argues, that one could make successful predictions based upon regularities of this sort. Examples of this sort are sufficient to show that regularity and prediction are not sufficient to account for the practical considerations he has in mind and which will genuinely track genuine causal relationships.

Since mere regularity and prediction are insufficient to guarantee the type of practical payoff that Woodward is looking for, Woodward argues that manipulability succeeds where the other theories fail. The ability to manipulate certainly falls under the banner of practical concern as he has defined it. Moreover, manipulation provides the proper benchmark for distinguishing genuine causation from apparent causation. Consider again the case of a moving shadow. All can agree, as was stated above, that there is no genuine causation between the shadows themselves from moment to moment. The object casting the shadow is a genuine cause of the

shadows. The question is how we achieve our confidence in judging so. On the manipulationist account, our confidence comes from the fact that we could conceivably set up an experiment to manipulate the object and look for corresponding changes in the shadows. Our success in this experiment would show that the object is the real cause of the shadows, while one could not conceive of a successful corresponding experiment between the shadows at various times.

One objection that could be raised against the manipulationist theory of causation is not in fact a distinct theory at all but is rather a subspecies of Humean regularity theory. Although one is taking a more active roll by setting up a manipulation experiment, what one is looking for after having set up the experiment is a correspondence between the manipulations and the ensuing effects. It is unclear to me that the manipulationist account adds anything to regularity theory that cannot already be accounted for. Indeed, it seems to me that the upshot of successful manipulation is an observed regularity of the Humean variety.

Another objection that could be raised against Woodward's argument is that he is drawing a false dichotomy between theories that are practical and theories that are impractical. It seems to me that any theory of causation would have practical application insofar as it could be used to design an experiment or to bring about changes in the world. It seems to me that any theory could be exploited in

this manner to manipulate states of affairs. Woodward may have taken what I think to be a feature of *any* theory of causation and has tried to build a unique theory of causation out of that feature. For example, Lewis's counterfactual theory, while not explicitly a theory about manipulation, could be exploited to bring about changes in the world just as much as any regularity theory. Woodward himself seems to agree with me on this point that an "impractical" theory could be successful based on successful experimentation. But if that is the case, then the distinction he has made between a practical theory and an impractical one does not seem to hold. The epistemic insights about causation only being reliably detectable through manipulation seem to be compatible with all of the following as I understand them: Lewis's counterfactuals, Salmon's conserved quantity theory, and Humean regularity theory. For example, Lewis might be correct in his counterfactual account of causation. But this is compatible with Woodward's claim that the only way we have access to the correct causal relationships is through experimentation. In other words, the experiments and manipulations might tell us which counterfactuals are the correct ones, but this does not render a counterfactual account false in itself. So while Woodward may be making an interesting, perhaps even correct, observation about our epistemic access to causation, it does not seem to follow that other, potentially more metaphysical, theories of causation are false. It is

not then a question of manipulation versus non-manipulation but rather a question of correct causal judgments versus incorrect ones. Manipulation may be an epistemic tool to determine which judgments are correct; but it is still the theories themselves and the actual success of the judgments made via those theories that will determine which theory of causation is the correct one, regardless of our epistemic access to the correctness of those judgments.